

## AGRICULTURAL TOPICS

# AN EVENTFUL YEAR IN BRITISH FARMING POLITICS

From Our Agricultural Correspondent

The Christmas break in our cities seems to get longer and longer with the years. But we still have some way to go to get back to the traditional 12 days, which were quite possible for medieval agriculture, when the weather had cut out all work on the land and there was no stock calling for more than casual attention. Winter milk production and the still general methods of intensive livestock management rule that out for most of us today.



Not, however, for all. The trend that began some years ago on some of the corn-growing farms in the United States of shutting the place up and moving south once the seed was safely in and covered by the snow has, to a small degree, come here. There are generally a few British arable farmers of the more prosperous sort to be found on Christmas cruises.

Perhaps the real distinction in farming today is not so much between large and small acreages, as between those systems which call for continuous labour and supervision and those which are punctuated by long periods of relative leisure. Even so, in our climate, the leisure is never a certainty. We have seen years when barley was harvested on Christmas Eve and the holiday was a bare two-day break in the muddy business of getting out the last of the sugar beet.

### BUSY ENOUGH

This year all such tasks were, if not completed, well in hand. And, though stockmen were still busy enough over the holiday period, an increasing number of farms in the past few years have contrived means to take much of the drudgery out of their winter working. It is a process that will have to be taken farther if present trends continue.

The year 1964 has been an eventful one for British agriculture, full as it was of political alarms and excursions. Behind these there were still at work more continuing pressures—falling manpower and rising land values, a tendency towards still more specialization and concentration—and the reactions which these evoke both in and out of farming itself.

The sector where these pressures are still strongest was not always as prominent in the public eye as some others. But dairying was seldom completely out of the news in a year when a crisis in even liquid milk supplies sometimes seemed quite possible and the world had to be scoured (improbable as this would have seemed a couple of years ago) for butter to spread on British bread.

As much as anything else, it was the financial position of the smaller dairy farmers in the western half of the country which lay behind the National Farmers' Union demand, voiced at the beginning of the year, for a 25 per cent increase in real farm incomes. These, above most others, had been feeling the strain of a 10-year descent from the expansionist plateau of the early 1950s.

### SOME RELIEF

They did get some relief in the 1964 price review. A really ungenerous settlement was hardly to be expected in an election year, especially when there was a paper saving of over £60m. on the agricultural estimates and, in any case, their increased farm price could be collected from the customer. Even so, the number of farmers going out of milk has not diminished, particularly in those parts of the country where reasonable alternatives to milk production suggest themselves. Some of these

may be no more profitable but at least they are less demanding of time and effort.

The review award reflected also the changes in general support policy adopted as the result of the breakdown, a year before, of the negotiations with the European Common Market countries. An agreement reached in principle just before the review began, with the four main grain importing countries, made it possible to write into the award standard quantities for the home crop guarantees: 3,300,000 tons for wheat and 6,500,000 tons for barley. They will affect the deficiency payments on this year's large cereal harvest.

It had been intended to bring in standard quantities for beef and lamb as well, but negotiations with the importers ended in deadlock. As things turned out this hardly mattered; the meat market this year has more often been characterized by scarcity than surplus. Continental buyers were active here all through the early part of the year and their purchases round about Whitson put the then Minister of Agriculture in an embarrassing position when he returned from the British agricultural exhibition in Moscow.

Mr. Christopher Soames contrived to find his way out of that one, as he did with most of the other political upsets which arose in the remainder of his Government's term of office. His own term had been an eventful and active one, which even confinement to a hospital bed was not allowed to curtail. It was from his bed that he pushed through the agreement for a cereals marketing organization now taking legislative shape under a minister of a different political colour.

### SUBSTANTIAL SAVING

Change of administration, indeed, has not been marked so far by any major change in agricultural policy and Mr. Fred Peart was quick to declare his adherence to the principles of the Agriculture Acts of 1957 and 1964, as well as to that ark of the covenant, the Act of 1947. He still has to face his first review, when he may well be grateful for the fact that the meat situation over the year should result in another substantial saving on his department's estimates.

Sometime in the year ahead, presumably, a political decision will have to be taken on the future of British meat marketing. The Verdon Smith committee report, so full of interesting fact and so short of really radical suggestions for improvement, appeared in February and the interested parties are still being consulted. Its main recommendation, for a non-trading fatstock authority with a wide range of disparate duties, was received with no great enthusiasm by anyone. The farmers' organizations still hanker over something a great deal tighter and some butchers still appear to be in favour of maximizing market anarchy.

### FRESH THINKING

Meanwhile, economists have pointed out, the British beef eater is chewing his way through his capital by consuming beasts at ever younger ages and lighter weights. This, as things are at present, gives the producer the quickest turnover and the best return on the quite considerable capital locked up in beef, whether or not his activities can be classed as "factory farming".

This term has come to have two quite different connotations according to the circles in which it is used. Among small livestock producers it carries their apprehension about the effects of vertical integration and the competition they face from very large-scale enterprises, such as those which now dominate poultry and egg production. To a fair section of the non-farming public it conjures up the horrors so graphically described in Mrs. Harrison's *Animal Machines*.

For all its exaggerations and misreadings of evidence, this book, like Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*, started fresh thinking among those who had been inclined to take new

techniques for granted. June saw the setting up of a committee to consider what changes might be necessary in the law governing the welfare of farm livestock in the light of the new farming.

Farm chemicals also came under review, as the result of investigations made during the previous year, and whole groups were withdrawn from general use. Ironically enough the one which caused the largest public anxiety was one that had hardly been used on farms at all.

For those whose interests are still mainly centred in their own enterprises, 1964 was on the whole not a bad year in spite of rising costs. It was possible to make a reasonably early start with work, even if the spring turned out to be cold, wet and uncomfortably long. The summer made amends and a fine hayseal was followed by a quick and easy harvest. Most stock did well.

As always in farming, such generalizations do not cover all cases. There were farms and there were districts which the summer did not suit. But they were fewer than in many years.

### LOOKING AHEAD

The year 1965 does not seem likely to pose many marketing problems for livestock producers, except in the field of poultry and eggs, and perhaps pigmeat. For beef and lamb the new problems are more those of economic production than of making a price. For milk the short-term prospects are good and the longer future depends on how far the more profitable lines of manufacture are allowed to expand in this country.

Cereals may prove more difficult, if surpluses start building up again in the exporting countries, and the 1965 harvest may well be a testing time for the new marketing authority. A great deal of wheat has already gone in and the total acreage of grain will probably be up again.

In succeeding years there may well be repercussions from the agreement reached, after such long bargaining in Brussels, on a common grain price for the E.E.C. countries. A soft wheat price of £38 a ton and a barley price of £33 seem bound to stimulate production in countries whose export mechanisms permit them to unload at levels very much lower.

### CONFERENCES IN JANUARY

A wide range of topics is being covered by the British Cattle Breeders' Club, whose winter conference opens at Bristol on January 11. Among the papers will be those on dairy beef and an assessment of the Charollais as a crossing bull, the importance of milking rate, changing methods of feeding, prospects for the private breeder, and the use of computers in animal breeding problems. Hungarian cross-breeding experiments to improve efficiency in milk and meat production will be described by Professor Arthur Horn, of Budapest.

On the horticultural side a three-day conference starting on January 4 has been arranged for growers in the eastern region at the Hertfordshire Institute of Agriculture and Horticulture, St. Albans. Glasshouse improvement will be the main topic. A one-day conference for commercial growers on increasing tomato yields will take place at the Riseholme Farm Institute, near Lincoln, on January 12.

### 7,000 MORE DRIERS

Since 1962, when the figures were last collected, there has been an increase of 7,000 in the number of grain driers on farms in England and Wales. The biggest increase (just over 4,000) was in installations of the ventilated silo, bin or floor storage type. Continuous flow types and tray or batch driers showed smaller increases, but there was a fall in the number in sack platform driers.

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